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ABSTRACT

Argument for the establishment of an ordained permanent deacon in the United Methodist Church is presented. The confusing and inconsistent treatment of the ministry of deacon is noted along with many factors indicating the present inconsistency in theology and in practice. The implications of the 1976 inauguration of a diaconal ministry are mentioned, noting that the question of ordination or consecration needs to be addressed, and a wider version of work in the world needs to be described. The diakonia in the early church are examined, and theological reflections on the diakonia, representation, and apostlicity are presented. Possible implications of creating a ministry of deacon are examined. The diaconate in other churches (such as Roman Catholic and Episcopal) are noted with a focus on ecumenical agreements about the deacon and the alternate ordinal. Two controversial issues are whether an ordained diaconate for service would weaken Christian servanthood and whether people should retain the expectation that every elder should first be ordained a deacon. Restoration of an ordained ministry of diaconal service could help regain a crucial dimension of ministry. (SM)

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The Permanent Diaconate Revisited

by Gerald F. Moede

When the 1988 General Conference of the United Methodist Church reconstituted a Commission for the Study of Ministry and drew up a revised mandate for it, why did the General Conference specifically cite as a matter for study the question of a permanent deacon? Why was this recommendation of the 1984-88 Commission included for consideration? Several factors can be cited:

• A host of "frontier mission" needs are exploding in the society of the late twentieth century. These needs must be addressed by the church; they are different from those of the past, and we need to address such needs in new ways. Who will serve, and how will new ministries be understood and authenticated? The permanent ordained deacon is one possible way to address emerging missional needs into the twenty-first century.

• Agreements between and among the churches are reminding us of the early church's flexibility as to the meaning and use of ordination, thus freeing the church to understand it in a wider context. (Although in *practice*, our parent bodies exhibited great flexibility themselves!)

• The meaning and exercise of the ministry of deacons in the United Methodist Church have been, and continue to be, unclear and inconsistent. We already have, in fact, permanent deacons. Sometimes we conceive of deacons as ordained persons, at other times we define their ministry as if it is outside the ordained ministry.

We begin then, by noting the current confusing and inconsistent treatment of the ministry of deacon in the 1988 *Discipline*. Paragraphs 430.1 and 430.2, in discussing ordination and the authority granted in ordination, clearly describe the ministry of elder, as if the present deacon is not ordained. This definition continues in par. 432, where ordination is defined in terms of what an *elder* does.

However, in par. 433.2, we are told that deacons are indeed "ordained ministers who have progressed sufficiently in their preparation for the ministry. . . ." That is to say, they are *preparing* for "the ministry," (which apparently means the ministry of elder), but as yet have no real ministry of their own!

Finally, par. 434 allows that deacons may be granted permission to administer the Lord's Supper. Thus, there is nothing de facto unique sacramentally in *ordination* to elder's orders, since what is prayed for and granted in ordination can also be granted to a deacon juridically *without* ordination as an elder! Or so it appears. Clearly we have more work to do in this area.

Many factors indicate our present inconsistency, in both theology and practice. Many persons presently ordained to the ministry of Word, sacrament, and order are in fact appointed to quite different tasks and roles; that is, appointments beyond the local church.

On the other hand, many lay persons with special professional qualifications for significant social and community Christian ministry are eager to exercise their gifts in Christ's name and the church's service. The way we authenticate their ministry is inconsistent.

In our present practice, what justifies the order and office of deacon in the passage from lay witness to elder's orders and full conference membership? In practice, an average deacon is no more truly diaconal in the strict sense of that word than many active lay persons. Those who serve as pastors of congregations get permission to do all that an elder does, including the administration of the sacraments, and thus their ordination to the ministry of elder loses its significance (and even its integrity)! Moreover, the growth and diversification of the special appointments of elders to roles that are specifically diaconal (in form and spirit) remind us of the inconsistencies and even the inequities into which we have drifted.

When, in 1976, the United Methodist Church inaugurated a diaconal ministry, it took a significant stride toward initiating a kind of permanent deacon. Perhaps the time is now ripe to draw the implications of the 1976 decision and finish what we began then.

If we do that, work would need to continue on at least two fronts. First, diaconal ministry seemed to be partially conceived, or at least it eventuated, in what are primarily "intrachurch" occupations. These certainly need to be included in what a permanent diaconate would be about, but a much wider vision of work "in the world" would need to be described as well.

Second, the question of ordination or consecration would need to be addressed. In 1980 we described diaconal ministers as representative ministers, and we agreed that "the ordained ministry is defined by its intentionally representative character, but its passion for the hallowing of life," but then we decided that *these* representative ministers should be consecrated, not ordained.

New, or very old, understandings of ordination have emerged in and between the churches since 1976, which should help us to conceptualize and implement an ordained ministry of deacon whose primary ministry will be to serve human need.

In this paper I shall argue for the establishment of an ordained permanent deacon whose ministry of service would be understood as representative. This diaconate would meet the criteria the United Methodist Church has been using in recent years for ordained ministry, but it would not be aimed primarily at evolving into an elder's ministry or that of bishop. Present deacons, deaconesses, home missionaries, and diaconal ministers who chose to do so could opt for this kind of ministry. Permanent deacons would not normally serve as pastors of congregations. They would be appointed by, and accountable to, their bishop. Perhaps some would be expected to itinerate where their service was needed; others could be allowed to choose their place of service, as ABLC elders do now.

My argument suggests that the pastoral ministry of elder is focused in and through the gathered church as it experiences its own identity in worship and dedicates itself to mission. The diaconal ministry, on the other hand, is, or ought to be, focused in or toward the world as a bodying forth of the church's practical and secular commitment.

> Such diaconal ministries are no more elective in the Christian Church than the pastoral ministries, but they are not the same and do not call for the "special appointments" of *elders* to get themselves done—especially when there are so many

avenues of services not now being filled and so many persons professionally qualified for them who do not *need* "elders' orders."[1]

When the bishops of the United Methodist Church made their official response to the *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* document of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, they indicated an openness to investigate a different ministry of deacon. In their negative response to the work done from 1984-88, they did not criticize *as such* the proposal made for a permanent deacon. They did have problems with accountability, itineration, and the "appointment" of such a new kind of deacon.

This paper is written to continue the discussion. Let us turn immediately to the past, the better to understand the present.

Diakonia in the Early Church

Several references to deacons in the early church are in order. The first mention of deacons we find (as an identifiable group) is in Phil. 1:1. There they are named in association with bishops, with no mention of presbyters. I cite this only to remind the reader how early the concern for *service* as an office was institutionalized in the early church, not in relationship with priesthood. Apparently such service was considered to be a public function within the community which God had ordained to be exercised constantly and regularly.

Early on this person's responsibility was also connected to the community's worship, especially the Eucharist. In the *Didache*, for example, when there were not sufficient prophets or teachers in a community, the group is told to choose bishops and deacons "for they too perform for you the holy ministry of prophets and teachers" (Phil. 15:2) Ignatius of Antioch wrote of the deacons as the "servants of the mysteries of Jesus Christ"; they were to be "honored as Jesus Christ in the Church"! By the third century, Hippolytus's *Traditio Apostolica*, we hear that deacons were ordained. Their relationship to the bishops was already close. It is also probable that Phoebe in Cenchreae was a deacon (Romans 16:1). The "helpers" of 1 Cor. 12:18 or "those who labor among you" of 1 Thess. 5:12 may also have been in this office. The qualities required of a deacon listed in 1 Tim. 3:8-10 seem to relate this service to the table-waiting service which the Greek root would suggest. Most current scholarship hesitates to relate the Acts 6:1-6 passage too closely with the diaconate however.

But the New Testament does not present us with any catalog of permanent or temporary list of ministries; the situation was fluid until the late letters were written, and even then, there was no rigid or fixed standard. Even among the ministries which appear as permanent and public, there is not a clear distinction—the prophet can be a teacher. Neither do the lists of gifts (1 Cor. 12:28-31; Rom. 12:6-8; Eph. 4:11) agree. Suffice it to say that as it became an appendage to the presbyterate, and then a way-station en route to *that* ministry, (with its exercise in the West more and more restricted to liturgical functions), a great deal of the original meaning and potential of the diaconate was lost. Thus renewed study and conceptualization of the diaconate offers great hope for the future.

Theological Reflections

One is surprised how prominent the word *diakonia* is in the life of the primitive church. Jesus made the simple idea of waiting on table the normative expression of discipleship in his name! This fact dramatically demonstrates the reversal of the then (and now) current scale of values he instituted. All enduring values of life can be subsumed under *servanthood* or *service*.

Perhaps one of the clearest expositions of the universal dimension of this theme appears in Ephesians 4:11 and following. Biblical exegesis has only recently made clear that there should be no comma after *saints* in that sentence. Instead, it is the saints who are to be equipped for the work of *diakonia*, for *service*, and that the other charisms named are given to aid in that ministry, which is the very "building up of the body of Christ." If the church is rooted in Christ's *diakonia*, it will be a servant church, since this is how Christ saw his own mission. [2]

There are at least two points to be discussed here. The first has to do with the relationship between worship and work in the world. We have argued that *diakonia* or service can be said to be one basic reason for the existence of the church in the world. Serving is the basis of all ministries in the church, but who manifests the relationship between service to the Christian community and service to the world?

> It is essential to embody the truth that worship and service are profoundly one. This order of ministry (the deacon), more than any other, *represents* the unity which exists between faith and works, love of God and love of neighbor, between Christ present in the sacraments and Christ present in the least of the needy person.[3]

Representation

A second point concerns *representation* as such. Most agreements on ordained ministry being reached in this decade are stressing the *representative* nature of the various ordained ministries of the church. The United Methodist *Discipline* has used representative language since 1976.

United Methodist scholars have contributed to an understanding of ordained ministers as representative. James Logan put it this way:

> The ordained ministry is properly called a "representative ministry." It is representative of the ministry of Jesus Christ given to the whole church, and therefore the ordained ministry re-presents before the general ministry the calling of all Christians to ministry. The summarizing and representing of Christ's ministry to the general ministry is basic to the distinctiveness of ordained ministry.[4]

He continues:

> In other words, the purpose of the representative ministry is to serve as the constant reminder to the whole people of God of their commission through baptism to be engaged in the ministry of reconciliation and service.[5]

In a brochure on ordination, Thomas Langford has written:

> . . .within the company of Christians and among Christian ministries there are some who are called by God and whose calling is recognized and endorsed by the church as having special tasks—namely the task of ministering to those who are in ministry, that is, of being a representative minister.
>
> Ordained ministry is important in the life of the church because it functions to testify to the central event of the church's life: the good news of Jesus Christ. Ordained ministry is given the task of publicly presenting and representing those events and authorities and powers which are essential to the ongoing life of the church. Without the gospel, without its proclamation and enactment, without continuous discipleship, there would be no church and no witness. Ordained

> ministry, consequently, represents the action of God and His church to perpetuate the gospel.[6]

The concept of representation arises out of, and is consistent with, a "People of God" ecclesiology, in which all are called to serve, in a variety of ways. From the beginning, God has called some members of the body of believers to particular kinds of ministerial leadership for the sake of the whole. All receive some kind of charism, or gift (1 Cor. 12). But the church has always had persons who held specific authority and responsibility (1 Thess. 5:12). In an accountable manner, these persons proclaim God's Word, articulate the community's thanksgiving, confession, administer the sacraments, and in their own selves embody the service and offering of the church to God and the world.

These leaders are particularly called to make visible and audible the ministry of Jesus Christ to the church and the world. Indeed, that idea of "making visible" is one of the root meanings of the word, *representative*. Such persons are ordained by the church.

The *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* document, on the question of representation, quotes a sentence from the Roman Catholic-Anglican Canterbury statement almost verbatim:

> As herald and ambassador ordained ministers are representatives of Jesus Christ to the community, and proclaim his message or reconciliation.[7]

An English Methodist now teaching at Duke Divinity school, Geoffrey Wainwright, professor of systematic theology, makes a relevant observation on this point:

> The idea [of representation] is that the. . .ordained ministry brings the multi-faceted ministry of the whole Church to sharp or concentrated expression in such a way that all Christians may be stimulated and enabled to exercise the Church's ministry. . . .The special character of the ordained consists precisely in its being an efficacious sign of the furtherance of the divine purpose both in the Church and in the world to which the Church bears witness.[8]

In the representation concept, ordination marks both the identification of the office bearer with the total ministry of the church and his or her being differentiated in a ministry from the unordained membership of the church. The minister as representative is to lead the church into the recognition of its own total corporate ministry.

Ecumenical agreements among the churches have also employed the notion of representation in recent years to describe ordained ministry. Thus, for example, the Canterbury agreement on ordained ministry, between the Anglican communion and the Roman Catholic Church, utilized this notion, as do the *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* agreement of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and the Consultation on Church Union's *COCU Consensus*. The United Methodist Church has given general approval to both of these agreements. Inconsistent use of representative language caused it to be questioned at the 1984 General Conference, but the 1984-88 Commission reworked its language on representation with the person who had identified the 1984 problem. The 1988 report used "representative" language, citing its Latin root to describe its meaning in this way:

> These persons are particularly called to make visible and audible the ministry of Jesus Christ to the church and the world. In this respect, they may be called representative. In them, the church seeks an example of the holiness and loving concern to which the entire church is called. Persons with such a call, and with the accompanying grace and gifts, are ordained by the church.[9]

The focus of service of the ordained presbyter (elder) and traditionally the bishop is Word, sacrament, and order, usually and primarily, exercised within the church. But who is the representative person or group to relate church and *world* in a representative fashion, to remind the laity of their ministry in the world?

Apostolicity

The question of what constitutes "apostolic ministry" has been basic in recent study of ecclesiology, as the churches have tried to move beyond a mechanistic view of what constitutes apostolic succession. Agreement is being reached on what this succession of apostolicity is: it centers around persons who communicate apostolic witness and teaching. The idea is that God calls certain persons in the community to continue this service within the other services—the church *itself* is apostolic. Persons who do this normally are ordained. "The primary manifestation of apostolic succession is. . . in the apostolic tradition of the Church." [10]

But what about the aspect of apostolic ministry that meant so much to Jesus and the early church—that of humble service to human beings? This was a central concern of Jesus' ministry, and it was taken seriously by the disciples. Should not *this* aspect of apostolicity have its own place in the ordained, representative ministry? Through it the grace and love of Jesus are communicated. This is not suggested as a matter of status or honor but as a concern relating to authentic apostolicity. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, has recognized the nature of *diakonia* as a sharing in the ministerial priesthood of Jesus, and thus has included the deacon within holy orders.[11]

In the early church the inseparability of work in the world by the Christian and worship (*leitourgos* means the peoples' work) was known and maintained. But how can this necessary relationship be re-established? A consultation of deaconesses observed:

> The relationship between worship and works of love must be especially emphasized . . . .Separating worship from *diakonia* leads of necessity to a two-fold loss of substance: the act of worship loses its orientation toward the world, and the works of love lose their spiritual content. The relationship finds its deepest expression in the celebration of the Eucharist, for this is the place where Christ, the *diakonos*, who carried the misery of the whole world, who draws us into his reconciliation and grants us to share already in his coming kingdom, gives himself to us.[12]

Thus the unity of service of God and service of humankind needs constantly to be made clear in the church. We do serve God in receiving God's service of humankind with praise and thanksgiving, in praying for the conditions of all people, and in placing ourselves at God's disposal. Our doxology praises God's *diakonia*. In fact, our service is sustained by praise. We serve the world's people in testifying to them that they are only *really* served by the service of God, and in actively sharing in this service of God for humankind. The gathering of the congregation in worship and its mission to witness of word and deed are equally essential forms of the service which the church owes to the world.[13]

God's active loving in service is the motive for all Christian service. God serves—the source of all our service is God's service—God's ministry to all creation.

The question boils down to this: If all Christians are called to serve, in one place or another, how may the need for service in the world be best carried out and ordered, and how may the relationship between worship of God and all kinds of service best be symbolized and represented? One response churches are making to this question is to reconstitute the permanent ministry of deacon as an ordained ministry in its own right—a ministry in which they serve needs directly and remind members of the congregation of their mission of sisterly and brotherly service.

Possible Implications

I would argue that there is value and justification for instituting an ordained ministry, the purpose of which would be to serve human need directly and to exemplify the unity of the gathered community at worship and the human beings in need outside that community.

What would be possible implications in bringing into being such a ministry of deacon? How would we describe ingredients of such an "ideal" deacon of the future?

Elements

We remember that such deacons are called to serve and to remind all members of the body that they too are servants, to assist them in developing their own type of service. The deacon who exemplifies or personifies service is thus not intended to *replace* diaconal ministry of the entire people of God, or to act as *substitute*. Rather, by focusing and embodying service in their own lives, deacons help the diaconal responsibility of the *whole* church. Futhermore, the appointment and employment of deacons who assist the elder in worship and the Lord's Supper help to keep lay people aware that worship in general, and the Lord's Supper in particular, are always to be related to service in the world.

Our ideal diaconate should have its own form, its particular character, in the local church, *for* the world, where the need is greatest. "Like the Lord, the deacon 'washes the feet of others.'"[14] The diaconate should not be seen as a preparatory ministry to some other form. (Deacons in church history were sometimes directly ordained to the episcopacy.) Nor should it be defined in *negative* terms or over against the presbyterate. On the contrary, the deacon can be placed as the member of the congregation whose secular service permits his/her to "assist" the elder in gathered worship in such a way as to exemplify the unity of the congregation's worship and its service.[15]

It is important to avoid two extremes: There is always the temptation to assign the deacon to "doing church work" as an arm of the presbyter or bishop on the one hand, retaining a close focus on intrachurch activities.

At the other extreme is the temptation of engaging completely in secular activity without visible connection to the church and its worship. We should strive rather to conceive of the deacon's ministry as belonging to the "church-world" correlation. Some deacons will gravitate to one pole and some to the other, but all need to move in the same general orbit of work and worship.[16]

Kinds of Service

What forms of service might be included in what we are describing? There is scarcely a limit to what can be envisioned, with the one proviso that the ellipse of service included have as its two foci the worship of a congregation and service in the world.

Perhaps the latter might best be placed within the framework of "taking responsibility for the individual well-being and collective future of humankind." Pope Paul VI felt that such broadly-conceived tasks as building up the cities where people live, or creating new modes of neighborliness and relationships might be included in such a conception.[17]

Particular concerns such as these would certainly be included: legal aid to the poor, ministry to migrants, drug rehabilitation, and service in various levels of government and community organization. Persons engaging in such work will already have a large degree of expertise, but such "city-wide" work would represent the ministry of Christ's people at both a congregational and regional level.

At a more personal level one could include such types of service as medicine (nurses and doctors), teaching, various kinds of personal and group counseling, and social work.

Other types of diaconal work could include church administration, church school education, and music. The work which, in the last century, has been done by deaconesses would certainly be included.

Bearing in mind the wide variety we have mentioned, one can understand why it would be important that the traditional relationship between the bishop and the deacon be maintained. How this might best be done in the United Methodist Church is not yet clear. The Commission which worked last quadrennium agreed that any permanent deacon would need to work under the appointment of a bishop, and remain accountable to the bishop, but no agreement was reached as to whether a deacon's work could be found at the individual deacon's initiative, or whether the church would need to identify the field of labor of each person. As a matter of fact and precedent, most elders now ministering in appointments beyond the local church, seek and take initiative in securing their ministry, and bishops appoint them to these fields. Using a similar pattern for permanent deacons would therefore not represent a radical departure in practice.

The kinds of service deacons could fulfill in the church's worship service also could vary greatly. In the Roman Catholic Church, Vatican II increased the liturgical functions proper to the deacon by including: assistance at the Eucharist, blessing marriages, presiding over worship and prayer services, and conducting funerals.[18]

Although liturgical functions could vary, it would be important that the role be integral to worship but not be confused with the main responsibility of the presbyter regarding Word and sacrament.

The Diaconate in Other Churches

A serious attempt is underway in various churches to renew their long-neglected diaconal ministry; we shall concentrate on two:

Roman Catholic

Vatican II gave great impetus to a new start in this direction by what it said regarding the ministry of deacons:

> 29. At a lower level of the hierarchy are deacons, upon whom hands are imposed "not unto the priesthood, but unto a ministry of service." For strengthened by sacramental grace, in communion with the bishop and his group of priests, they serve the People of God in the ministry of liturgy, of the word, and of charity. . . .[19]

Since the Council adjourned, the Roman Catholic Church has moved rapidly to bring into being a ministry of "perpetual deacon." Pope Paul approved the request of the American bishops in 1968 and four training centers for deacons were established. By 1971 there were 430 candidates in training, some of them married; by 1974 there were more than 1,000 in service, and by the mid-1980s the number had risen to more than 7,000. The programs in which these deacons minister are very flexible, open to innovation and change. In *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem*, Paul VI outlined eleven tasks, centering on the ministry of liturgy, Word, and works of charity.

Episcopal Church

The Episcopal Church is in a time of transition regarding its conception and employment of deacons. The renewal of the order began in the Anglican communion as early as 1880. The first American Episcopal canon law on the subject dates from the turn of the century. There are at present more than 1,000 permanent deacons in this church, male and female, in almost all dioceses, having their preparation in both local and graduate seminaries.

The 1952 General Convention of the church passed legislation under which the permanent deacons were assumed to be self-supporting. The 1970 General Convention voted that ". . .those made deaconesses by the laying on of hands, with appropriate prayers, be declared within the diaconate." This Convention also authorized women to be ordained in this historic order in the same way as men.[20]

The Episcopal Church intentionally does provide for two types of deacons: *interim*, in preparation for priesthood, which amounts to a kind of internship, and *perpetual*, which is an ordained lifelong diaconate.

The canon for perpetual deacon reads:

> A man of Christian character, proven fitness, and leadership in the community, who is willing to serve in the capacity of Deacon without relinquishing his secular occupation, may be proposed and recommended to the Bishop, for enrollment as a candidate by the Ministry and Vestry of the parish in which his service is desired.[21]

The experience of the Episcopal Church with this kind of permanent deacon should be helpful to the United Methodist Church, in terms both of potential and problems to be faced. The ministry of perpetual deacon is proving itself to be valuable, and its numbers are growing.

Ecumenical Agreements

We should also note what ecumenical agreements of this decade are saying about the deacon, since these writings often release the churches to meet future needs but always in the context of taking the past seriously. Agreements with both Protestant and "catholic" churches are moving toward an ordained permanent deacon.

One such document is the *COCU Consensus*, an agreement on ministry twenty-five years in the making. The 1988 General Conference of the United Methodist Church agreed that this articulation is an "adequate expression of the apostolic faith, order, worship, and witness of the Church," and thus we need to consider it as we reflect on future forms of ministry in the United Methodist Church.

This statement sees deacons at work in both church and world; it describes various places: servants in worship; partners in congregational oversight, participants in governance; leaders in administration; leaders in mission; servants in pastoral care, and servants in unity.

Two paragraphs condense this ministry

> 58) The nature of the diaconal ministry is classically symbolized by the special role of the deacon in worship. The deacon is the People's helper or servant as he or she is reader and proclaimer of the gospel, leader in intercession, presenter of the Church's offerings to God, minister of the eucharistic bread and wine, and organizer and guide for the People's worship.
>
> 59) This liturgical role of the deacon, in turn, finds its proper daily expression in a pastoral function of service and of helping directed to all who seek or need assistance. To the deacon is assigned a special role in the Church's ministry of teaching, in its assistance to those in need of any sort, and in its witness in the world on behalf of the forgotten, the oppressed, and the suffering. With these functions the deacon also assumes a special role in the guidance, focusing, and administration of the Church's ministry of service.[22]

Another important ecumenical document which is breaking new ground in this area is the agreement written over more than a generation in the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, entitled *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. One hundred twenty theologians, appointed by the churches of the WCC, labored on this agreement for many years.

It was published in 1982, and at present the 300 member churches of the WCC are responding to it and preparing to "receive" it into their own polities. Among other things regarding the deacon *BEM* says:

> 31. Deacons represent to the Church its calling as servant in the world. By struggling in Christ's name with the myriad needs of societies and persons, deacons exemplify the interdependence of worship and service in the Church's life. They exercise responsibility in the worship of the congregation: for example by reading the scriptures, preaching and leading the people in prayer. They help in the teaching of the congregation. They exercise a ministry of love within the community. They fulfil certain administrative tasks and may be elected to responsibilities for governance.[23]

A commentary on this text makes clear that there are many unresolved questions about this ministry, but it also suggests "today there is a strong tendency in many churches to restore the diaconate as an ordained ministry with its own dignity and meant to be exercised for life."[24]

When the bishops of the United Methodist Church made their formal response on *BEM* to the World Council of Churches in 1986, they had this to say about the proposal cited above:

> *BEM* calls into question the United Methodist practice of making deacon's orders the preliminary step into elder's orders. It forces us to articulate a theological meaning of the "diaconal ministry" apart from itinerancy and membership in the Annual Conference.

May we not consider this openness of our bishops a granting of freedom, if not an invitation, to envision a permanent diaconate in the United Methodist Church as we move into the twenty-first century?

The Alternate Ordinal

Finally, I shall quote from several pages of the 1980 *Ordinal* adopted for Official Alternative Use by the 1980 General Conference. Much of the theology of *diakonia* for the ordained minister of service I am advocating is already in place in these pages. There is first the examination of persons:

> My sisters and brothers,
> every Christian is called to follow Jesus Christ
> in a ministry of service to the world
> for the glory of God
> and the redemption of the human family,
> in the power of the Holy Spirit.
> God has called you to a special ministry
> that will exemplify this servanthood
> in the Church and in the world.
> In the name of Jesus Christ,
> you are to serve all people,
> particularly the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely.
> You are to represent to the Church
> the ministry of servanthood in the world.
> You are to interpret to the Church
> the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world.
> At all times, by your life and teaching
> you are to show Christ's people
> that in serving the hopeless
> they are serving Christ. (page 31)

Among the questions asked of the candidates for deacons are the following:

> Will you serve Christ in others,
> and always be ready
> to help those in need?
>
> Will you, in the exercise of your ministry,
> represent to the People of God
> their own responsibility to serve others
> by an active concern
> for peace, justice, and freedom
> for all people?

Later:

> The ministry if a deacon is
> to participate with the elders
> in leading the worship of the people
> and in preaching the Word of God,
> to assist the elders at Baptism and the Lord's Supper;
> to serve the needs
> of the poor, the sick, and the oppressed
> to fulfill such other responsibilities in Church and society
> as are appropriate to a ministry of service;
> and to represent to the Church
> the role of servanthood in the world
> that properly belongs to all God's people.
> These are the duties of a deacon.
> Are you willing to undertake them? (pp. 34, 35)

Commentary

> The examination of the candidates for the ministry of deacons begins with a brief statement by the bishop which relates the *diakonia* of ordained ministry which is in a special way exemplified in the very name of the ministry of service to which *deacons* are called. (p. 67)

Ordination Prayer for deacons

> The ordination prayer for deacons begins with praises to God for the *diakonia* of Christ—celebrated in Mark 10 and Philippians 2, the biblical bases for that representative *diakonia* in Church and society which deacons are called to exemplify.
>
> In keeping with the traditional account of the institution of diaconal office (Acts 6), the prayer's central petition is a trinitarian invocation of the Holy Spirit (*epiclesis*); it echoes the candidates' earlier affirmation of the Spirit's motivation for their outer call to ordained ministry made in response to the first question of their public examination.
>
> The prayer concludes with petitions in the biblical idiom that ask on behalf of the candidates the specific gifts and graces necessary for the effective exercise of their exemplary ministry of service in the Church and society; its climax is the familiar trinitarian doxology and the people's Amen.

These lines offer eloquent testimony to a new (or very old) understanding of a ministry of representative ordained *diakonia* which I affirm and advocate. Here is a ministry with integrity of its own, not preparatory to anything else, not finding fulfillment in any other ministry except service, which would exemplify the interrelationship between works of mercy in the world, and the worship of God in liturgy.

Remaining Issues

To conclude this paper I should like to address two questions that will undoubtedly be controversial and in need of debate in the present quadrennium as the church discusses and decides the kind of deacon it wants for the future. The first has to do with whether an ordained diaconate for service would weaken the servanthood to which every Christian is called. The second question is whether we should retain the expectation that every elder should first be ordained a deacon, whether ordination is "cumulative."

Every Christian is indeed called to a ministry of service. That is why the 1988 General Conference decided to call every member of the church by the term *minister*. But that call and name does not preclude the ordination of some to a representative servant ministry.

> The entire community of Christians was called a royal priesthood by Peter; nevertheless we ordain presbyters (or elders) to represent Christ's acts to the community in the Lord's Supper. [25]

Professor J. Robert Wright poses our question sharply:

> Just as the ordained priesthood points both to the priesthood of Christ and to the priestly calling of the entire church, so also, in the same way, can not the ordained deacon point to Christ as servant of all and to the diaconal calling of his entire body which is the church? [26]

Wright suggests that the same logic that allows us to ordain elders to focus a priestly ministry in the church will allow us to ordain deacons to focus a ministry of humble service to the world. The nature of ordination is, or course, involved in this discussion. This organic interpretation sees ordained ministers doing certain service in the name of Christ in the community, representing Christ in different ways, focusing the service of the community in its work of "showing forth" Christ in the world. Leadership needs to be embodied. Ordaining a deacon to make explicit the *diakonia* all are called to exercise does not absolve the rest of the Christian community from loving service.

There is another reason why permanent deacons should be ordained rather than consecrated. Their function is to represent the service of Christ in a public and accountable manner. In doing that, they focus the service of the community whose purpose it is to present Christ to the world. But the service does need to be made explicit by being focused in one person or one group of people among the community.

The diaconate can be understood as a focusing of the duty incumbent upon every Christian, and upon the entire Christian community, of love of the neighbor expressed as service to the neighbor. It is a means of making explicit the *diakonia*, the ministry of service, which the entire Christian community must show both within itself and in its dealings with the world.

My argument is built on the biblical insistence that the whole people of God is called to diaconal ministry, *including the ordained ministry*. Ecumenical agreements are focusing the responsibility of the ordained in the continuance of the apostolic office of "making Christ present in the world." I am arguing that there is a danger this presence be too narrowly confined to the redemption realized through the blood of Christ the high priest—this is the presence celebrated by the elder in preaching and the administration of the Holy Communion. There is also the presence of Christ who preached the coming of the reign of God, who came

not to be served but to serve all human need. This presence too needs to be focused in an ordained person to be constantly visible.

Ordaining such deacons would also bring out more clearly the way in which these people are acting on behalf of the church, of the Christian community as a whole. It would also help them by giving them the backing and support of the entire community in a situation in which they might otherwise feel isolated. Their ordination would strengthen at least the public commitment and presence of the church, making this activity formal and ultimately to be taken more seriously in the world.[27]

To ordain for service will require an enlargement of the place for which we have traditionally ordained. I would argue that the words and life of Jesus, the long exercise of *diakonia* in the church justifies such an enlargement. Does not service in the world in Jesus' name "make the risen Christ redemptively present in history"?

The second question is more intricate, since it involves all who are already elders and bishops, as well as those becoming deacons. Should the church continue to insist that all elders must first be ordained deacons? Is it necessary to progress to one ministry through another? Is there a kinds of cumulative effect that accrues from one to another, all being fulfilled in the ministry of bishop?

Arguments can be brought on both sides of this question. In favor of retaining the present practice, one can argue that the catholic tradition has done it this way since at least the Middle Ages. Further, one can say that every elder (and bishop) should first experience the ministry of service which is the focus of the ordained diaconate. *Diakonia* needs to characterize each ministry.

Opposing this viewpoint is a more organic concept: various kinds of service need to be authorized and authenticated by ordination. Collapsing one into others calls into question the integrity of the deacon. If service needs to be a component of the ministry of elder and bishop (as indeed it does), it can be included in the ordination ritual: elders' orders also can include a probationary period. Furthermore, our present ordained deacons serve primarily (as we have already noted), as mini-elders; they do not really exercise any different or unique ministry of service at present!

Finally, how is a hierarchical understanding and practice of ministry to be avoided if one must move "through" or beyond the deacon to be an elder, or bishop?

Perhaps the strongest argument against the traditional "ladder climb" from deacon to elder (presbyter) to bishop is that it disrupts the organic nature of the church and its ministry. All are given gifts, the church is an organic whole. James Barnett puts it strongly:

> . . .the shift from a church whose ministry encompassed all its people, each with special functions, like the organs of a body, for the good of the whole, to a church whose ministry was one of ascending grades characterized by rank, status, and power, is to be found wanting when tested by the revelation in Christ.[28]

Roman Catholic understanding of priesthood and episcopacy is still comfortable with a "progressive" understanding, where each ministry is "included" in the one above it. Vatican II, for example, agreed that *all* ministries are included, and find their fulfillment, in the ministry of bishop. But I do not believe United Methodists would be comfortable with such a position, which is really only the ultimate logic of the "progression" theory, carried to its conclusion.

English Methodist scholar Geoffrey Wainwright voices his concern about the "progression" theory in these words:

> I remain gravely suspicious whenever it is claimed that presbyters/bishops "remain a deacon." Factors such as sentimentality and false modesty never seem far away, together with a lingering sense of the "grades" of ordained ministry with

> concomitant ideas of "promotion" and the "cursus honorum" borrowed from the Imperial Service. . . .[I] think it is a misuse of the order of deacon (however "traditional") in the Medieval and post-Reformation West) to let the diaconate serve [as a probationary period]. . . .I am in favor of a "real" diaconate. . .it would seem best for it to combine liturgical and "social" functions. . . .It would be a distinct ministry. . .alongside elders and bishops, rather. . .than a "step" towards "higher" ministries.[29]

Dr. Boone Porter, an Episcopal Church scholar, who was one of those involved in revising the Episcopal Church's *Book of Common Prayer* ten years ago, questions the progression theory vigorously:

> It was only later and gradually that the linear or stepladder view prevailed. In this latter view distinctive or unique talents or approaches totally different from one another are really ruled out. Each has to fit perfectly inside the other, like the succession of concentric Polish wooden dolls. . . . Distinctive gifts simply don't fit one inside another. . . .It is this recovery of the distinctive gifts which some of us would feel to be highly desirable for the Holy Catholic Church at the present time.[30]

What we have been advocating has to do with the very nature and mission of the church. I conclude with a quote from Karl Barth:

> In every respect, even in what seems to be purely inner activity like prayer and the liturgy and the cure of souls and biblical exegesis and theology, its activity (the ministry) is always *ad extra*. It is always directed *extra muros*, to those who are not, or not yet, within, and visibly perhaps never will be.[31]

Barth is here describing an ideal; certainly most of the ministry of the presbyters and bishops becomes directed "inside the walls." But his point is crucial. Whose ministry is directed primarily to the world, to those "outside the walls"?

I believe that the restoration of an ordained ministry of diaconal service would help us to regain this often lost dimension of ministry, enlarging the quality and scope of our witness and service to all humankind, for the sake of Jesus Christ.

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